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ABSTRACT

The CIEE Semester Advanced Russian Language Program for Americans at Leningrad State University is a 16-week program for thirty out-standing students with a minimum of three years' background in Russian. This report is addressed to American Slavicists and to younger American students of Russian, and describes the purpose, history, and present state of the program. It also offers a critique, a proposal for improvement, and an argument for continuation. It is concluded that the program provides invaluable experience and tangible benefit to its participants, and is definitely worth saving and improving upon in the future. (Author/AM)

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RUSSIAN LANGUAGE STUDY IN LENINGRAD: THE CIEE SEMESTER PROGRAM

During the academic year 1974-75 it was my privilege to serve as resident director of the Semester Advanced Russian Language Program for Americans at Leningrad State University (LGU). Those eight months spent in the USSR in intensive association with 60 outstanding American students and their Soviet hosts undoubtedly represent one of the most educational and interesting periods in my life. The heartaches and frustrations will, in time, be forgotten--and should be. The many moments of joy, of illumination, and of friendship will, I hope, remain forever in my memory and in that of the students and the Soviet people with whom these experiences were shared.

The following remarks constitute my report to the American Slavicist profession on the program which is called the CIEE Semester Program, or the Semester RLP. I have a few observations to make about its purpose, its history, and its present state. Then I will offer a critique, a proposal for improvement, and an argument for the future of this program.

First of all, the purpose: Who are the students who are served by the Semester RLP? And which of their educational needs are addressed?

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The Semester RLP is designed for those currently enrolled American students who have completed at least three years of Russian language study at their home institutions. As such, the RLP attracts primarily juniors, seniors, and recent baccalaureate recipients. In 1974-75, the overwhelming majority of Semester RLP participants were from 19 to 22 years in age.

Thirty students are selected each semester in a nationally-advertised competition. The usual number of applicants is approximately 90. Thus, the ratio of applicants to those selected is about three to one. Selection is based upon the student's overall academic record (especially in Russian and related subjects), a battery of oral and written tests, letters of recommendation, and evidence of good health, emotional maturity, and sound character. Those 30 students selected each semester represent the "cream of the crop" of our current American college and university students of the Russian language. They come from all over the United States, from institutions both large and small.

The RLP offers to its student participants an opportunity to fulfill their aspiration for an extended stay in the Soviet Union (16 weeks, to be exact) to further their study of the Russian language at an advanced level--with native Russian teachers, in an authentic Soviet Russian environment--and to meet and befriend their Soviet contemporaries--particularly the молодёжь of Leningrad, the second largest city in the USSR. It is an intense cultural experience, and brings each participant into immediate contact with the true pulse-beat of Soviet society. And the students, having returned, find themselves

in an advantageous position as far as graduate school and Russian-related employment are concerned. Graduates of the Semester RLP now use Russian in a variety of endeavors: in international corporations, broadcasting in Russian for the Voice of America, and teaching the language--just to mention a few.

What about the history of the Semester RLP? How old is it? Who started it? What significant changes have taken place in it since the beginning?

The Semester RLP is now almost seven years old. It began in the spring of 1970. Those first 29 pioneer participants were led by David Chandler, the program's first resident director. One of his charges was a young woman named Elizabeth de Kosko, then an undergraduate at Queens College. In 1974-75 she returned to the RLP in Leningrad as my assistant. All together since the beginning there have been 14 contingents, approximately 420 program participants, and seven resident directors--David Chandler (Carleton College), Roger Haggelund (Northern Illinois University), George Kolodziej (Ohio State), Richard Martin (formerly Penn State), myself, Sanford Couch (Arizona State), and, currently, Michael Rosenbush (University of New Hampshire). Contingent Number 14 (fall 1976) was selected last April and arrived in Leningrad in mid-September 1976. Applications for the next spring contingent are due in October, and for the next fall contingent they are due in early March.

The Semester RLP was originally negotiated, and is administered today, on our side, by the Council on International Educational Exchange. Its assistant executive director is

Mr. Irving Becker. The CIEE acts on behalf of a consortium of American colleges and universities which, depending upon the kind and degree of their participation, are classified as core schools, sponsoring institutions, and affiliated institutions. The current list reads as follows: core schools--Dartmouth College, Georgetown University, University of Kansas, Michigan State University, and the University of Washington; sponsoring institutions--all of the core schools plus the City University of New York, University of Illinois (Urbana), Indiana University, Middlebury College, University of Minnesota, Oberlin College, and Syracuse University; and, affiliated institutions--University of California, Ohio State University, University of Pittsburgh, Princeton University, Stanford University, Tufts University, University of Virginia, and the University of Wisconsin.

The Semester RLP is run according to a formal agreement, a protocol, signed jointly by the CIEE and, on the other side, by Sputnik, the Soviet Youth Travel Bureau (younger, poorer relative of Intourist). CIEE's representatives in the USSR are the resident director and the assistant resident director, who deal on a day-to-day basis with the representatives of Sputnik and of Leningrad University's Foreign Study Office (иностранный), and the Department of Russian for Foreigners.

The first program participants were housed in LGU dormitory No. 2, on the west end of Vasilev Island. They did not have Russian roommates, a situation which was remedied in subsequent years, when RLP participants were shifted to dormitory No. 6, on the Petrograd side facing the Hermitage across the

River Neva. Here each room of Americans is equipped with one or two Russian roommates.

In the beginning each student was required to audit a course (of his/her own choice) and to write a lengthy term paper in Russian, in addition to the rather heavy burden of regular classes in the language and lectures on literature and Soviet society. The term paper has been eliminated, auditing made optional (and nearly obsolete because the students regard other uses of their free time as more important), and the regular academic week reduced slightly from 21 to 20 hours (still too long, in my opinion).

The schedule of Sputnik-arranged excursions and other extra-curricular activities has gradually been reduced and made partly optional in order to give the students some free time (שהות חופשית).

A few other improvements have been made; for example, newer and more comfortable beds in the dormitory, and elimination of some of the less successful lectures, excursions, and out-of-town trips, but basically the Semester RLP has remained unchanged since the spring of 1970.

What is the condition of the Semester RLP today? What are its main components? How much time do the students spend at each of its major activities?

First of all, the academic program consists of three lessons--each one hour and 20 minutes long--per day, Monday through Friday, for a total of 15 lessons, or 20 hours of instruction per week. The first lesson begins each at 9:00 a.m., and the last lesson ends at 1:20 p.m., with 10-minute breaks between lessons. There is a fixed schedule of classes running for 14

weeks which includes conversation, phonetics, grammar, translation, analytical reading of literature, literature lectures, lectures on Russian culture and contemporary Soviet society, and instructional films. In addition, some students arrange private consultations with their instructors for extra tutoring. While the amount of homework required had been gradually reduced over the years, the classwork load in the Semester RLP must still be considered heavy by American standards--in my opinion, excessively so.

In the extra-curricular area, Sputnik arranges each week two or more museum visits, bus excursions, meetings with Soviet youth (meaning Komsomol "activists"), theater performances, films, etc. Traditionally, Sputnik has tried to make its own job of accountability easier by insisting that these activities be obligatory (обязательно) for all. However, they have mellowed, or, shall I say, relented, over the years against the intransigence of resident directors and the typical American aversion to being coerced or herded about.

Three or four weekends during the semester are occupied with 48-hour trips to places like Tallin, Riga, Novgorod, and the island of Kizhi on Lake Onega in Karelia. There is a two-week break at the mid-point of the academic semester during which the group travels to Kiev, Tbilisi, and Moscow, then rests up for a few days in Leningrad before beginning its final seven weeks of study.

The program, with its heavy academic, extra-curricular, and travel components, is culturally rich and diversified but also

exhausting, even debilitating, for the students--especially since they come to regard their free time as the most important, and they push that free time to its limits by developing their friendships and associations in the city. Most RLP participants would agree that what they did on their own, in their spare time, made the strongest impression on them, both language-wise and in terms of overall cultural experience. Unfortunately, the scheduled group activities, both academic and otherwise, are so numerous that they force the students into a conflict with themselves, and, sometimes, with the American resident director.

The present state of the Semester RLP can be illustrated by means of an elaborated comparison. It bears a striking resemblance to the building in which its classes are conducted at Leningrad State University. I speak about the building which houses, apart from the RLP, the School of Oriental Studies, the Philological Faculty, and, most important for our purposes, the all-University Department of Russian for Foreigners. Students of LGU normally refer to this building by means of the endearing contraction **филфак** (pronounced feel-fák, with the vowel ä as in the English exclamation ah!)

Филфак (from the words **филологический факультет**) is located just a glance, or a stone's throw (**рукой подать**) from the LGU main administration building and the office of foreign programs (**иностранец**). **Филфак** stands near the southeast corner of Vasilev Island, overlooking the River Neva, with a breathtaking view--to the mainland side-of golden-domed St. Isaac's Cathedral, the world-famous equestrian statue of Peter the Great--referred to as "The Bronze Horseman," the Admiralty, and, a bit further upstream, the former Imperial Winter Palace--now housing the renowned art museum known as the Hermitage.

Thus, our students, should they choose to use the front door (парадный ход) on their way to and from classes, are able to look across the river and feast their eyes on one of the world's most gorgeous displays of architectural virtuosity. It is a truly magnificent setting.

The фильфак itself, while certainly not one of St. Petersburg's most distinguished buildings, has, in fact, a rather benign, even pleasant external appearance. In contrast to the pinkish hue of buildings to either flank, and to the yellowish cast of those further down the Embankment, the фильфак is adorned in the third of this city's primary colors, a kind of cabbage green.

The foundation for this building, originally known as the Palace of Peter II, was laid in 1726 (some 250 years ago), although it took several decades for the building to be completed. Its construction was exploited as a kind of workshop, an apprenticeship, if you will, for the then budding school of indigenous Russian architects. The chief Russian зодчий, one M. G. Zemcov, had studied abroad and, even at home, worked under the watchful eye of his more experienced foreign mentors. As a result of hesitancy and a certain tension between indigenous Russian and foreign elements in its construction, the Palace of Peter II finally emerged in its finished form as a somewhat eclectic edifice. Neither late Baroque, nor exactly Neo-Classical, it mixes styles in a manner which may have been disappointing at one time to the fastidious among both Russian and foreign observers, but which gained acceptance in time and began to more or less blend with its surroundings; for example, the Twelve Collegiums and the Menshikov Palace. And, for the

past 200 years since its completion, thanks to the herculean (or, shall we way, amazonian) efforts at maintenance and restoration so important in the architectural history of Leningrad, the Филфак building has managed to preserve almost completely intact its primeaval appearance, and even to undergo from time to time some necessary improvements and modernization, such as the addition of electricity, running water, and steam heat. Thus today, on the whole, the Филфак--home away from home for 35 American students each semester--presents a rather appealing facade and a cozy, bustling interior decor.

Why then, one may ask, are our students, while spending, in the course of 14 weeks, a mere 300 hours within the walls of Филфак, not more completely satisfied with the experience? Why are they, indeed, so often bored, on the verge of falling asleep, even resentful, while sitting in the very same chairs once occupied, perhaps, by Ivan Pavlov (of Pavlov's dogs fame), by the modernist painter Vrubel (who became obsessed with--and ultimately possessed by--a demon), or even by Vladimir Ilich Ulianov (who later enjoyed a distinguishing career culminating in a private, though frequently visited, mausoleum)? Why do our students resent having to copy notes from the very same blackboard from which, perhaps, the young poet Aleksandr Blok, blushing in embarrassment, erased with a тряпка some of his less satisfying love lyrics? Why do our students soon begin to disdain the spendid view from the University Embankment by entering and leaving Филфак from the rear (чёрный ход) where there is so little to delight the eye or the sense of smell in the almost entirely enclosed courtyard and the dank alleyways leading to the University cafeteria?

In short, why is the CIEE Semester Russian Language Program in Leningrad not the stimulating, vital, and dynamic program it ought to be? And could be? Surely the venerable and gracious old ФилФак itself, even with all its shortcomings, is not the problem. The problem is the activity conducted therein for the benefit of our students. It needs not just window-dressing, or replastering and painting of the facade--it needs renovation (капитальный ремонт).

What needs to be done to improve the Semester RLP? The gist of my critique and concrete recommendations for restructuring the program are contained in the following proposal, which I have submitted to the Curriculum Revision Caucus, and the Policy Committee of the Russian Language Program.

1. Each class period should be shortened from one hour and twenty minutes, to one hour. [Students are not able to maintain their attention span for longer than 60 minutes under RLP circumstances.]

2. The number of hours in class per week should be reduced from 20 to 15. [David Chandler was the first resident director to note the excessive class-hour load. I am only one of the most recent. Yet, little has been done to correct this situation.]

3. The two present lecture series (on Russian literature and on contemporary USSR) should be merged into a single, one-hour-per-week lecture series on Russian culture. The new series would consist of 14 one-hour lectures during the semester and include the following subjects: (a) medieval Russian architecture and iconography; (b) architecture of St. Petersburg-Leningrad; (c) Russian theater and drama today; (d) Soviet film;

Soviet music; (f) Soviet painting and sculpture; and (g) contemporary Soviet literature. According to this proposal, all lectures dealing with the history of Russian literature, and those dealing with aspects of the contemporary USSR other than the arts, would be eliminated. It is assumed that these areas are adequately covered for the students either at home in the USA or in the extra-curricular phase and the overall life experience of four months in the USSR. [In fact, the lectures on literary history have been either too complicated for our students, or irrevelant to their main interests, or redundant. The страноведение lectures, for example, on "Lenin as the Founder of the Soviet State," "The USSR: A Multi-National State," "Soviet Society and the Individual," and "The Soviet Educational System," have been pitifully short on useful information, propagandistic to the point of being offensive, and, often, an insult to the intelligence of our students. These subjects are covered adequately in the conversation classes themselves, whose content is primarily страноведение, and in various excursions, for example, to the Museum of the Revolution, to the Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR, and to the learning institutions (ясли, детский сад, начальная и средняя школа, П.Т.У.--that is, профессионально-техническое училище, etc.). Besides, we must be frank, the greater share of reliable information about Soviet society our students acquire from their Russian friends and from direct personal observation.]

4. Some system of required auditing should be re-introduced in order to compensate for the envisioned reduction of the classroom week from 20 to 15 hours. Each student should attend, perhaps once per week, some regular Leningrad University course

(of his/her own choice) with the consent of the appropriate department and instructor. Some students would select courses in Russian literature or linguistics, others in Soviet or American history, others in economics, etc. It is my suggestion that a term paper not be required, but rather that the resident director use some informal means of holding the students accountable for their auditing. [Their level of comprehension of the audited lectures should be high at least at the end, because the lectures would be in a field of their special interest, they would have thematic continuity, and they would all be given by the same instructor. This would also bring our students into contact with regular Soviet students in the latter's own workplace, that is, the classroom--and enable them to develop acquaintances based on common scholarly interests.]

5. Overall direction of the Semester RLP in Leningrad should be shifted from Sputnik (which is, after all, primarily a travel bureau and an arm of the Komsomol) to officials of Leningrad State University and to the American resident director and assistant resident director. Under present arrangements, our students and resident staff members enjoy, at best, an extra-mural status at Leningrad University; we carry tourist visa rather than the foreign student and visiting faculty visas I believe we should. The initial advantages of having an agency like Sputnik to expedite matters of internal transportation and to make reservations have, in my opinion, long been eclipsed by the handicaps of trying to operate an academic and cultural enterprise under the watchful and often obtuse supervision of an agency whose aims are mainly tourist-oriented, commercial, and ideological.

We must do what we can to convince Leningrad University to assume full responsibility for the Semester RLP in its academic, extra-curricular, and house-keeping phases.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect the American resident director to take a much more direct part in making arrangements of both an academic and extra-curricular nature for the program. In most cases, program contacts with representatives of LGU and other agencies would be handled more diplomatically and more effectively by the American resident director, in conjunction with assigned university personnal. Without Sputnik, left to confront LGU and other Soviet agencies on our own, we would receive--I am convinced--much better treatment in Soviet society than we do now. Our official relations with Soviet people would be more dignified, more equal, more worthy of the citizens of great nations.

This is the extent of my report concerning the CIEE Semester RLP: its purpose, its history, its present condition, and my critique and proposal for improvement of the oldest and most prestigious Russian language program for Americans at Leningrad State University.

So as not to leave the impression of being pessimistic about the Semester RLP, I would like to conclude by reassuring fellow Slavicists and our younger students of Russian that (1) the program provides invaluable experience and tangible benefit to its participants, (2) the University of Kansas, and I as one of its representatives, continue to support the Semester RLP and to encourage our more successful advanced students to apply, (3) the present weaknesses in the Semester RLP can be remedied, (4) the program is definitely worth saving and improving upon in the future, for it renders an important service to our prof-

ession, to our society, and to the long-range goal of cooperation and friendship between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Yet, I submit that the current shape of the Semester RLP in Leningrad, perhaps as a microcosm of détente at its present stage, does not entirely satisfy the best interests of the students and of our profession. Dignified but persistent and principled efforts must be made to raise the quality of the CIEE Semester Program.